"TO IMPOSE THIS DERIVATIVE UNDERSTANDING OF SPONTANEITY UPON REVOLT IS TO REMAIN OBLIVIOUS TO THE THOUSANDS OF NETWORKS, FRIENDSHIPS, MEETINGS, CONSPIRACIES, SONGS, GANGS, AND WHISPERS—TO THE BEAUTIFUL SOCIAL ORGANIZATION—THAT MAKE AN UPRISING POSSIBLE... RATHER THAN UNDERSTAND SPONTANEITY AND ORGANIZATION TO BE IN FUNDAMENTAL CONFLICT OR CONTRADICTION, WE SHOULD SEE THEM AS EXISTING WITHIN A GENERATIVE TENSION."

BLACKBIRD PUBLISHING
PO BOX 11142
DURHAM, NC 27703

ALL COCOONS ARE TEMPORARY

REVISITING LEADERSHIP, SPONTANEITY, AND ORGANIZATION FOR REVOLUTIONARY STRUGGLES IN THE TWENTY FIRST CENTURY

VERSION 1.0

This is dedicated to S., L., and M. This world just wasn't good enough yet to deserve you.

This requires new ways of understanding leadership within revolutionary political cultures, alongside a fundamentally different way of understanding the relationship between organization and spontaneity, that resists the definitions and methods given to us by politicians, political parties, corporate executives, technocrats, non-profit activists, and academics. These new ways already exist, and more are coming. They are constantly appearing and disappearing. They may flare up briefly at a "moment of danger," or secretly persist in the shadows of daily survival, but they are always there.

The cocoon of our current revolutionary form is always temporary.

Freedom is always imminent.

Introductions

"You cannot revolt against a people whose values you share."
-Amos Wilson

"Organization" and "Leadership" can work like sacred terms on the American Left. They are often overused to the point of exhaustion and virtual meaninglessness. For many, the hollow use of these terms bounces harmlessly off of our ears, sounding too close to the language of marketing execs or bureaucrats to interest us.

These terms are used less like a soft reading lamp and more like a harsh strobe light, synchronized for distraction and spectacle rather than illumination. Go to a "march" (read: permitted parade) put on by one of these groups, and you'll hear hours of forgettable speakers drone on with some of these key words: "What we need now is to finally get **Organized**, under good **Leadership**." "The masses need **Organization**, not **spontaneous** adventurism." "Follow [insert oppressed group] **Leadership**." "Our non-profit is helping develop the next generation of youth **Leaders**." It is a conglomeration of fluff, specific enough to sound like it's saying *something*, vague enough to mean almost *anything,* and therefore actually meaning *nothing*. One could be forgiven for thinking that these words had in fact no meaning at all.

Our society, ruled by a certain kind of modern nation-state, drives us to use these terms in certain ways that are narrow and limiting. It takes a very small meaning for these concepts, and substitutes that for the whole range of possibilities, erasing any alternatives. Not unlike its monopoly on violence, states seek to monopolize these terms for those who live under these structures. Our imagination is captured and colonized. Unfortunately, this even (and especially) applies to the Left, frankly to the point of parody.

This is a problem. The Pan-African Marxist Amilcar Cabral once said, *"You measure a people's potential for liberation based on how different their culture is from their oppressors."* This astute observation is sometimes read in a moralist or performative way, i.e. that it is morally "wrong" to talk or look like our oppressors. But it is

really a strategic and political rather than moral or aesthetic observation. Our power and advantage, as much as in numbers and labor, lies in our ability to creatively think through problems, to "organize" and "lead" ourselves in ways that are fundamentally different from and illegible to states and capitalists.[12]

This piece aims to refresh and refine our thinking around the concepts of **Leadership**, **Organization**, and **Spontaneity**, and in particular examine the actual relationship between these very real phenomena in on-the-ground, combative struggles versus how they are conceived of in the largely stale imagination of the American Left. While the Leninist and nonprofit Left(s) probably deserve the most scrutiny here, it must be said that much of anarchism has done us no favors in clarifying the mess either, and often makes the confusion even worse. Ultimately, the radical philosophies from the European tradition carry some value but also immense colonial and Enlightenment-era baggage.

None of the discussion in this piece is particularly new, but there feels to me a renewed urgency and value in revisiting these concepts now. The number of new people who have entered into our movements during and since the 2020 uprising, alongside the struggle against Cop City and Palestinian solidarity struggle, has been staggering. Predictably, with new energy comes old questions about how we structure our movements. We naturally enter revolutionary struggle with a range of assumptions we inherit from the society we live under. Some of these assumptions will derive from our own unique experiences of culture, identity, exploitation, and oppression, but many derive from more broadly ideological presumptions that drape across our society almost universally.

In a society like ours, this means that many people, of all kinds of class and racial backgrounds, enter our movements understanding terms like leadership, organization, and spontaneity in ways that are *familiar to and encouraged by states and capitalism*. For this reason, a huge number of brilliant, beautiful people have entered into our movements in the past few years with a deep desire to contribute, only to find that the actions and campaigns that feel the most alive and relevant, that grow the largest, seize the streets and the buildings

[1] It should also be apparent that to adopt the worldview of the oppressor does deep psychological damage to the oppressed. No shortage of radicals have pointed this out, from the radical pedagogy of Paolo Freire to the searing insights of Malcolm X, James Baldwin, and Frantz Fanon. This should be understood to include organizing ourselves in ways that mimic the colonial statecraft of our enemies.

[2] I think it will become clear throughout this piece that I am distinctly *not* proposing a prefigurative politics, whereby the current organizational forms we use become the forms of the new society.

hold nationwide, this tactic had become almost second nature to many crowds, offering a (relatively) low-risk way for medium to large numbers of people to cost cities that primarily rely on the circulation of goods and services huge amounts of money. Just this past weekend, protesters used it again to block multiple highways in LA during that city's rebellion against ICE raids. A tactic improvised in 2014 in one city took on a life of its own, generating new organizational forms across terrains of struggle.

A stale view dead-set upon one organizational (state-like) form probably would dismiss that small highway takeover in 2014 as a silly gesture compared to the strikes and unions of old, and refuse to learn anything. As Walter Benjamin wrote, "To historians who wish to relive an era, Fustel de Coulanges recommends that they blot out everything they know about the later course of history. There is no better way of characterizing the method by which historical materialism has broken."[18]

A more discerning eye might see the highway takeovers' remarkable similarity to the *piqueteros* demonstrations of 2001 Argentina, when thousands of recently unemployed workers joined a country-wide revolt by taking over and setting up communal kitchens on highways surrounding cities. One might then ask the next question at hand: What does the resonance of this tactic with so many people tell us about the economies built upon financial speculation and commodity circulation we now live in? Where does it tell us our power is located? And in turn, what other new tactics and strategies, and accompanying organizational forms, will derive from this new circumstance? What will be those forms' contributions and what will be their limitations?[19]

To give analytical primacy to the role of spontaneity, and its accompanying new organizational forms, is not to fetishize or valorize such acts uncritically. That an act of communal revolt is engaged in freely and creatively *does not* mean it doesn't have reactionary elements deserving of criticism, or that it doesn't have certain limitations that need to be transcended. But revolutionaries can only contribute to that transcendence if we accept that *our own assumptions and organizational forms will themselves ultimately be set aside*. Our seriousness and self-discipline can be a virtue; our self-importance cannot.

large trucks carrying commodities. *Planning enables spontaneity, which enables more planning.*

[18] *Theses on the Philosophy of History*, Walter Benjamin.

[19] Joshua Clover, who was an absolute real one, may he rest in peace, considers these questions in great detail in his book *Riot, Strike, Riot: The New Era of Uprisings.*

Back to Basics

To restate from earlier, the central questions we should be considering are ***whether or not a form of leadership or organization helps to generate the conditions for spontaneous revolt***, and in turn, ***what kind of new organizational forms are being generated by this revolt.*** This set of questions can work at the micro- and macro- level; it might be used just as much to consider how we want to coordinate ground-level tactical decisions during a protest as to consider huge questions concerning production and culture after a revolution. These questions imply that, in contrast with a colonial logic that locates *only one* kind of valid organization, there are actually *many kinds* of leadership and organization. The culture and social reproductive qualities of these can differ in marked ways, and accordingly they may either reinforce social hierarchies, break them down, *or do both* in unexpected and complicated ways.

The central questions we should be considering are *whether or not a form of leadership or organization helps to generate the conditions for spontaneous revolt,* and in turn, *what kind of new organizational forms are being generated by this revolt.*

Also implied with these questions is the *analytical primacy* that should be given to spontaneity itself, and to new organizational forms that arise from those acts. A final example of this: When a group of black activists in Houston successfully took over a highway in solidarity with the Ferguson uprising in 2014, they were engaged in an unusual experiment. Sometimes a tactical risk like this fails and is forgotten, but in this case that experiment began to slowly echo. At solidarity protests later that year in the Bay Area and Durham, NC, and during the proceeding uprisings in Baltimore in 2015 and Charlotte in 2016, that tactical experiment was repeated successfully, often with a high degree of self-organization and coordination to allow for the safe entry of a large number of people onto a busy interstate.[17] By the time the 2020 uprising took

[17] This sometimes involves affinity groups bringing road flares and sparklers to hand out, or the picking up of reflective road construction materials as a march passed through town, as well as the use of large reflective banners and loud sound systems. In Charlotte in 2017, rioters who briefly blocked I-77 downtown specifically allowed black drivers in passenger cars to pass through, as well as white drivers who shouted "Fuck the Police" with the crowd, but *refused* to allow

the quickest, and articulate the most radical vision of a future society, almost invariably look very different from their initial assumptions. Sometimes these assumptions are so strong that participants simply cannot see the deep, beautiful ruptures occurring before their own eyes. Despite these radical shifts carried to fruition by the supposedly "unorganized," there persists a strange cognitive dissonance that argues being "serious" about "escalation" requires forms of organization that look like States, that this is what's "effective" and required for a movement to grow to any real size.

We've been told our whole lives that to get something done, you've got to be organized, and that organization looks like just *one thing*. But when "the masses" actually start to make shit happen, sometimes with very little help from the feckless Left, it turns out it often looks very different. The ensuing confusion is understandable, and a lot of well-intentioned activists react to this confusion with an anxiety that has them trying to stop the revolt from happening at all. Rather than study and learn from the dissonance between its theories of organization and the choices of many proletarians-in-motion, the Left chooses to either police that motion, or stick its head in the sand. In light of this failure, as well as the unwillingness or inadequacy of anarchism to properly address these concepts, this piece attempts to clarify and re-articulate an alternative understanding of these terms.

Most of my points in this piece draw from revolutionary writing and struggle that has existed for many decades. Though I am not black, in particular my thinking around this has been influenced the currents of the Black Radical Tradition that partly come out of Marxism but ultimately end up rejecting the hubristic approach of Leninist vanguards, in particular among the circle of revolutionaries active in Detroit in the late 60's and early 70's and the Afro-Carribean revolutionary thought of people like CLR James. My own involvement in labor, land defense, queer, anti-fascist, anti-prison, and anti-cop struggles since the late 1990s, and ongoing conversations with my own comrades about how best to participate in ongoing struggles, especially the uprising of 2020, obviously have influenced this discussion as well.

In terms of texts, this piece draws especially from:

- The Black Jacobins, by CLR James, on the successes and failures of Toussaint L'Overture's leadership in the Haitian Revolution, as well as the former Black Panther and political prisoner Russell Maroon Shoatz' reading of CLR James' work;

- *Organization and Spontaneity: The Theory of the Vanguard Party and its Application to the Black Movement in the US Today*, written in

1974 by Kimathi Muhammad, a member of the Dodge Revolutionary Union Movement who participated in the Detroit riots of that era

- The scholarship of Modibo Kadalie, who was a comrade of Kimathi a and CLR James and continues to write to this day

- The writings of the late anarchist anthropologist David Graeber, in particular his focus on how certain stateless societies develop cultural strategies to prevent permanent status accumulation

- A piece from the anti-state communist journal *Endnotes* called *"Spontaneity, Mediation, Rupture"*

- Several different pieces exploring autonomous self-organization by the Italian insurrectionary anarchist and bankrobber Alfredo Bonanno, whose unflinching courage and belief changed so many of us.[3]

I hope that this piece can be grounding for some folks starting to ask these questions for the first time, as well as for more experienced comrades who find themselves frustrated by the stale simplicities offered them by their ideological peers. Like so many of us, I am tired of having the contours of our movements demarcated by the presumptions of dead men from another continent. I am tired of being told by some dork with a clipboard to "get organized" when I already am. If I have to witness another non-profit volunteer in a neon vest protecting private property tell a group of black youth leading an actual fucking revolt to calm down and "listen to leadership," I may lose my shit.

Across our ecosystem of rebellion, the norms, cultural logics, and political definitions of Enlightenment-era European statecraft trouble our movements like the dead haunt the living. It's time to stop viewing the movements we are part of like a state views the society it seeks to rule.

[3] While I'm not drawing on it much in this piece, there is, obviously a massive amount of writing and thinking from indigenous perspectives that also makes many of the same points in this article. In particular I would encourage folks to check out the late Klee Benally's writings on autonomous organization and indigeneity. There is simultaneously a huge amount of writing from Central and South American autonomous movements dealing with horizontalismo, that, while I don't use much here, is highly relevant to understanding the dialectical relationship between organization and spontaneity, as we come to reframe both of these concepts. The new social forms and tactical innovations which occurred during the 2001 uprising in Argentina are especially relevant.

This way of thinking starts with an unspoken acceptance of bourgeois norms regarding what counts as "real" organization. It then substitutes spectacle and optics, of what one thinks others will see as "serious," for actual substance. Rather than consider the *new* organizational forms emerging from the *generative conflicts* between encampment militants and the student orgs that typically sought to contain them, certain leftists seek to impose an *old* organizational form more resembling of the state, which to them connotes a "serious militant" or "guerrilla" aesthetic. The irony is that, in doing so, they end up distancing themselves from the revolutionaries that *actually are* carrying out acts of sabotage right now in North America against the US-Israeli war machine. This leads us to the sad performance of the Leninists in my own backyard, who scream out their support for "the resistance" in distant Palestine, but refuse to even mention the names of comrades we have facing time for acts of arson or sabotage *right here*.[16]

This way of thinking starts with an unexamined acceptance of bourgeois norms regarding what counts as "serious" or "real" organization. It then substitutes spectacle and optics, of what one thinks others will see as "serious," for actual substance.

The desire to take our participation in struggles more seriously, to grow our capacity for self-discipline and coordination, to set aside the self-image of the "beautiful loser," are admirable and correct. The unspoken conclusion that this equates to structuring our movements like states is a clumsy and tragic mistake, at odds with our own lived experience of which sectors have had the most success in the kinds of escalation a participatory social revolt requires.

[16] Donate to Casey Goonan's case! https://freecaseynow.noblogs.org/donate/

set of conclusions about what kinds of leadership and organization are valuable, about which kinds develop the cultural capacity for self-governance, self-organization, and a truly communal distribution of not just resources but also *power*.

In Conclusion

This piece began as an attempt to work through the many confusions that arise when considering questions of **leadership**, **organization**, and **spontaneity** for revolutionary struggle. The simplistic and pat answers offered by most of the Left are useless. We are either given a flattened regurgitation of century-old bourgeois presumptions, wrapped in a synthetic, bright new red flag, or a kneejerk, reactionary rejection of the very questions themselves. The former is a tired, dead road, vomiting up failed 100-year-old platitudes of a bygone age. The latter valorizes a limited understanding of spontaneity, perhaps even fetishizes it, but risks cutting off our ability to critically consider what organizational forms might actually enable the creativity and adaptation that revolt requires. Once again, we need out of this trap.

On all sides we find ourselves in the well-traveled paradox of attempting to use capitalist- and state-ruled societies' definitions to structure our thinking on how to struggle against those very societies. To give another example of this paradox, in an understandable if not overly moralist attempt to project "being serious," a number of leftists have recently suggested more hierarchical, party-like structures as necessary to facilitate an escalation of confrontation on behalf of the western Palestine solidarity movement.

This can only be understood as a willful effort to *not* learn the repeated lessons of the encampments. Almost every report-back from both campus and non-student protests which escalated beyond symbolic protest, especially those that successfully seized buildings and held off police raids, reported that professional non-profits, sanctioned student orgs, and vanguardist orgs were more often an *obstacle* to such escalation. This observation was most certainly also true at the college in my town. More to the point, I am aware of *zero* acts of sabotage, attack, or occupation in North America in the months since the student encampments—and there have been many such acts—that have been claimed by the kinds of "serious" party-style Organizations™ that this position craves. So much for the Party being the vehicle of escalation.

It is 2015, in a mid-size Southern city. A multiracial local non-profit, which calls itself abolitionist, has called for a permitted "protest" in front of the police headquarters following a mass arrest of anti-police demonstrators who had taken over a highway a few days prior. Two friends, one black and one white and both formerly incarcerated, who organize with current and former inmates at the downtown jail, arrive carrying a banner declaring, "Burn Down Your Local Jail." An earnest young white woman in a neon vest approaches, clearly upset by the banner's message, and asks a rehearsed line, "Was this banner approved by black leadership?" Both of the friends barely know how to respond, trying not to laugh. "Which leaders?" they eventually reply.

Several days later, we learn that one of those permitted protest "leaders" secretly met with the police chief, without telling others in the movement, appointing herself a mediator and attempting to negotiate on the movement's behalf.

It is November 5th, 2023, in San Carlos, CA, and a Zionist group called "Friends of the IDF" is hosting a fundraiser. A protest was organized by a local Jewish Voice for Peace chapter, which brought out large attendance. Protest marshals brought by JVP physically attempt to prevent any efforts to disrupt the event, however, and eventually corral the protesters far away from the building such that the event's attendees could enter. When asked why they were doing this, one marshal said, "I'm just following orders."

Shortly before the event, however, an affinity group separate from the protest succeeds in sabotaging the water main of the building with some tools and quick-drying concrete. As the bathrooms and other facilities ceased to work, the event is stopped in just 40 minutes, and the attendees are escorted out of the back of the building. Three days later the saboteurs release a small statement explaining their logic and what tools they used.

On Leadership

It was magnificent diplomacy but ruinous as revolutionary policy. The slopes to treachery from the dizzy heights of revolutionary leadership are always so steep and slippery that leaders, however well-intentioned, can never build their fences too high.
- CLR James, on Toussaint L'Overture's negotiations with Bonaparte during the Haitian Revolution

It is totally incorrect to say implicitly that leadership only emerges from the creation of a political party.
- Kimathi Muhammad, "Organization and Spontaneity"

What is leadership? What does it mean to lead? Is it a permanent or temporary role? Is it chosen, given, or forced upon one by circumstance? Is it a "status" or is it bounded by a specific subject matter or specific proposal for how to solve a unique problem? What is the relationship between someone filling a "leadership" role and the rest of the room, march, neighborhood, union, or community? Should revolutionaries accept how leadership has been prescribed to us by the dominant society? Is it better to reject the notion of leadership altogether, as some have tried to do, or to redefine it to suit anarchist, communist, and anti-colonial aims?

Overwhelmingly the Left has defined leadership in terms that feel "familiar" to those who grew up living under states. Leadership for the Left has usually meant identifiable personas, placed at the top of vertically structured organizations that mimic state structures of administrative power. It implies, typically without even considering other options, a permanent rather than temporary kind of authority. This form of leadership carries a gendered logic, and often mimics the kinds of authority that appear in patriarchal social structures, regardless of the actual gender of the leader who occupies it.

To name its relational patterns more systematically, this kind of leadership tends to:

1) Conglomerate resources and power at the top of pyramids

2) Ignore abuse perpetuated by those with power and influence

3) Understand leaders in terms of status that are *permanent*, legible to the current ruling class, and bureaucratically coded[4]

[4] When I am contrasting "permanent" with "temporary" kinds of authority,

doing, we have no metric to actually judge our efforts. If the communists all decide its revolutionary to, say, take up hoola-hooping or assassinate the leaders of a rival radical trade union that insists on expropriating capitalist industry against the wishes of a conservative bureaucrat in Moscow, well, then hoola-hooping is now revolutionary, and anyone who says otherwise must be working for the CIA.

While of course we desire to "abolish the present state of things," I propose we set this derivative definition of communism aside, and opt for a different goalpost which reattaches our understanding to the actual society we're trying to create. For the topic at hand, I propose a metric that asks the question: ***Does this form of leadership and organization increase oppressed peoples' abilities to collectively self-organize and self-manage their own economic and political affairs, or does it suppress them?***[14]

This metric draws on Marx' own limited descriptions of what a communist society would (or does) look like: stateless and self-managed directly by the dispossessed themselves. In this description, Marx was not talking about a society ruled by a state controlled by a political party calling itself "Communist," but rather a *communist society*. "Communist" here is not describing the political tradition or iconography of a political party, but the nature of the social relations themselves.

This is where communism—*the daily lived reality of the thing* rather than its spectacle in the form of flags and icons[15]—actually comes from: the creative, collective problem-solving and fierce rebellion of the dispossessed and oppressed. As CLR James declared, "Every cook can govern." All revolutionary struggles tethered to this belief have at least some promise, regardless of their labels or iconography. Conversely, revolutionaries who have lost this belief are truly rudderless. Working backward from this observation, as well as from the lessons of anti-colonial and indigenous rebels who have fought to preserve stateless autonomous sovereignties in a wide variety of contexts for millennia, we can pretty quickly come to a very different

[14] I want to be clear here: I am not proposing the traditional anarchist concept of prefigurativism. That concept has its uses, but it's fundamentally at odds with this understanding of organization as transcendental. The revolution needs forms of organization and leadership that refuse the counter-insurgent logic of statecraft and invite space for popular, spontaneous initiative, but it cannot be expected that any one form of organization will be permanently and perfectly adapted to the needs of any and all possible future societies. Even from a classically anarchist perspective, this seems a both unrealistic and undesirable imposition upon the future.

[15] For a useful discussion about the nature of communist spectacle versus substance, and how it relates to police and prisons, check out the Simoun Magsalin's *Against Carceral Communism, for Abolition Communism!*

goes far enough, it will likely create new forms of organization that render the old irrelevant. *All cocoons are temporary and disappear.*

This last bit helps to explain why Organizations™ that place their own existence above the tasks they purport to exist to carry out—which is a defining feature of states and the organizational forms that imitate them—are so reticent to enable proletarian spontaneity: *they know that it threatens to render them irrelevant*. By contrast, an anti-state organizational form relishes this fact, understanding that in the dialectic between spontaneity and organization, it is a necessary revolutionary step for older organizational forms to be replaced by the new. "History bears witness to this fact, again and again: newly emergent struggles disdain existing forms. Instead, they generate their own forms, which are then disdained, in turn, in future waves of revolt."[13]

By contrast, the Leninist and non-profit models attempt to freeze history, to stop the generation of new forms in preference for a state-sponsored model that *allows only one*. The Party becomes the State, forever more.

These Organizations™ have a complicated relationship with revolt. They need the spectre of such spontaneity to exist—the social contradictions exposed by revolt justify these organizations' meager existence, and offers them a prime recruitment opportunity. But at the same time, this revolt must be kept distant, and above all prevented from generating its own forms of struggle that would render these Organizations™ irrelevant. Once their Revolution™ takes place, this revolt is no longer useful even as spectre, which helps explain why "socialist" states have so brutally criminalized strikes, riots, and protests, even and especially when organized by revolutionary workers.

A Brief Detour with Karl Marx and his Walking Dead

Marx once defined communism as "the real movement which abolishes the present state of things." Sometimes this is lazily read to mean, "Communism is what people who call themselves communists are doing", which explains why it is oft-quoted by apologists for the atrocities of governments that call themselves "communist." This is transparently circular reasoning that leads those of us who want actual, lived communism absolutely nowhere. If "communism" is just whatever people (or states) who call themselves communist are

[13] Endnotes 3.0, "Organization, Spontaneity, Rupture."

4) Reproduce careerist professionalism and technocratic forms of expertise

5) Replicate the logic of economic and political models that found their home on both sides of the Cold War in the industrial fervor of the 20th century

6) View problems from a thousand feet above. It tends to diminish, ignore, or punish the creativity of those who solve problems at the ground level, especially when those at the ground level employ models that are inconvenient to the career aspirations or long-term blueprints of middle-class intelligentsia

The Distance of this Leadership™ from Cultures of Militancy

Thinking on point number three, this leadership has no problem correctly answering the cliché question of the nosy beat cop, "Who's in charge here?", and is often happy to answer. It delights in its own legibility to those in power, and carries this legibility as a badge representing its own revolutionary "seriousness." For this reason this kind of leadership tends to be extremely vulnerable to state repression and to both soft and hard forms of counter-insurgency. As we've seen in the 2020 uprising, the visibility to police and power structures of this kind of leadership makes it maladaptive at contributing to confrontational or illegal aspects of struggle. Due to its visibility this Leadership™ is forced to protect itself by cutting itself off from the most advanced, creative, and militant aspects of popular rebellion or clandestine attacks.

How many times have we seen these "leaders" and their Organizations™ shepherd their flock home when their permit expires at dusk, leaving the bravest, the poorest, and those with the least to lose to hold the streets on their own? From Ferguson in 2014 to nationwide in 2020: when the daytime permitted rallies took place, the alphabet soup parties and non-profits swarmed like drunken bees looking for recruits, but when the people were building barricades and smashing jails and taking over buildings and fighting cops, when

"permanent" would also include the kinds of formal, state-like authority implied by elected officers and such. The individuals who fill those roles may only be in them for set amounts of time, but much like bourgeois democracy replaced the divine right of kings, the state-like authority of the position itself transcends their individual replacement. If an organization's form mimics the state in this way, it is likely that power remains at the top of the pyramid.

we were finally making the local ruling class *pay* a very real financial cost for its racist sins, all those professional Leaders™ disappeared into thin air. And when our comrades catch charges for participating in clandestine attacks, these groups with all their resources are shamefully silent.

The real tragedy here is not the cowardice of the retreating "vanguards" leaving "the masses" more exposed to the violence of the police—the Party for Socialism and Liberation's clipboards are hardly big enough to stop a rubber bullet or a fascist's stick anyway. The real tragedy is in how it robs many young well-intentioned activists of the opportunity to learn from the successes and failures of practical revolt and proletarian innovation.

It is not enough to sit on the sidelines of history holding a badly designed newspaper (or zine), pointing to the riots and saying to the world, "See, we told you that capitalism creates crisis! Now join our party!" We learn the contours of our historical moment, of our own time period's limitations and possibilities, through *participating,* and specifically, in participating in the risky, the dangerous, and the experimental. This is often where the poorest and most angry find their political home, and, importantly, it is the home of those who have been marginalized by the counter-insurgent role of non-profits. Conflict with the state—in the streets, on the picket line, in an occupied building—is where we build and exert power, and it is also our laboratory and our classroom. This means picking up the brick, helping set the fires, physically holding the line of shields, fighting the scabs on the picket line, helping young kids with their masks, blocking the doors of the school building with every chair you can find, carrying the wounded and stopping their bleeding at the back of the line.[5]

This Leadership™'s visibility to Power renders them a poor fit for learning from or aiding the most militant sector of struggle, and their outlook is often characterized by a barely concealed scorn for that sector.

If and when our bodies or minds can no longer play these roles, it means not just refusing to condemn those who do, but celebrating them, bailing them out, cheering for them, housing them, helping

[5] "To articulate the past historically does not mean to recognize it 'the way it really was' (Ranke). It means to seize hold of a memory as it flashes up at a moment of danger." – Walter Benjamin

against a society whose material conditions have changed. In fact, reorganizing their economic reality is often the first task they undertake as territory is seized.

Rather than understand spontaneity and organization to be in fundamental conflict or contradiction, we should see them as existing within a *generative tension*. To quote Kimathi Muhammad again,

> People who rebel, resist, and enter into life and death struggles never act without a sense of direction. They know what they want and they organize themselves to get what they want. Contained within that, spontaneity has a phenomenal capacity for organization. Both develop out of each other.

Thinking of these two concepts in generative tension, I would propose that a useful metric for revolutionary organization is ***whether or not that organization helps to generate the conditions for spontaneous revolt.*** In turn, a useful question for revolutionaries trying to understand revolt is: ***What kind of new organizational forms are being generated by this spontaneity?*** Reflecting on my own groups' contributions during periods of revolt, I think we have often successfully engaged with this first question, but have consistently failed at considering the second.

Going back to the earlier discussion of leadership, I propose we again imagine a demonstration as a microcosm for this larger dynamic. A protest might be organized by a coalition of groups in such a way as to preemptively snuff out any possible actions carried out freely and willingly by those who show up, or it might be organized in such a way as to *enable* those actions, with the initial organizing framework serving as a vehicle to share relevant information, protect those in the crowd likely to face repression, and coordinate said efforts by otherwise disparate elements in the crowd. Both of these are "organization," perse, but the former orients towards proletarian spontaneity as an enemy or at best as something to treat with caution and skepticism, while the other embraces it, acting as a vehicle with which to enable and expand that spontaneous activity, acknowledging that if such activity

The activities of revolt are spontaneous in that they are freely and creatively undertaken, and in that they disrupt the "continuous flow" of capitalist time, *not* in the derivative sense that they involve no planning or social organization.

> *opposite* of something natural. A spontaneous act is one that is freely undertaken. [my italics]

The Left's derivative use of spontaneity here, and its presumed contrast with organization, resides in 19th century bourgeois (and highly racialized) assumptions about the poor and oppressed: that on their own they are animal-like, acting out of pure natural and base instinct and incapable of planning or organization. This false understanding of spontaneity easily takes hold in a racist and capitalist society where these assumptions are common, even among the oppressed themselves.

In fact, the word "spontaneous" is derived from the Latin root *sponte*, meaning "of one's own accord, freely and willingly." Despite its common, derivative use, at its root "spontaneity" *does not* mean to act compulsively, immediately, or without thought or planning, but rather *to act freely and creatively.*

It is not just old-school state socialists at risk of making this mistake. Perhaps in anticipation of a Leninist regression, *States of Siege*, a widely circulated Tiqqunist text, states,

> Spontaneous, disorganized, leaderless, mass resistance movements, whether armed or unarmed, cannot both topple an entrenched ruling clique and reorganize the economic reality of a society. Without specialized detachments of intellectuals and creative thinkers, popular movements do not generate transformative slogans and theories.

This is a jumbled, historically inaccurate mess: First, "spontaneous" movements *are not inherently disorganized or leaderless;* second, they have demonstrably toppled many, many ruling classes throughout history and have repeatedly demonstrated an ability to reorganize their economic reality; and third, they obviously don't need "specialized intellectuals" to generate their slogans. This kind of confused nonsense is useless as revolutionary analysis, except to reinforce a kind of elitist self-importance that is better left to the Bob Avakians of the world.

The activities of revolt—a land occupation, a prison takeover, a wildcat strike, a street rebellion against the police—are spontaneous in that they are freely and creatively undertaken, and in that they disrupt the "continuous flow" of capitalist time, *not* in the derivative sense that they involve no planning or social organization. In fact, it is precisely these activities that typically *generate new forms of organization* which respond to the *new needs* of the people in revolt

them to a safe house, feeding them, and passing their courage on to a new generation. It means finding new terrains—new physical or social sites of conflict—to spread a current struggle to, in order to keep the state on its back foot and help the movement identify and expand beyond its own limitations and contradictions.

The professional and careerist notions of Leadership™ that predominate across the North American Left, which evolved to dialogue with and be *legible* to Power, are intentionally kept distant from this role. Their visibility to Power renders them a poor fit for learning from or aiding the most militant sector of struggle, and their outlook is often characterized by a barely concealed scorn for that sector.

The Tendency of Leadership™ to Treat Movements as their Own Private Property

Of course, this tension between "the masses" leading and organizing ourselves in revolt versus those professional activists who believe they are the Leadership™ is not a new one. Reflecting on the impotence of black "leadership" and the riots in Detroit in the late 1960's, Kimathi Muhammad named this same tension:

> It is somewhat disgusting to hear self-styled black leaders talk about leading the "unorganized" masses. It was the 'unorganized' masses who congregated in the streets, defied curfews, engage in direct physical confrontation with the police and military apparatus of the United States government, and unleashed a burning assault upon the property of their oppressors. If the black masses were unorganized, it definitely didn't appear that they were.

Muhammad was not opposed to organizing, organization, or leadership per se; he puts *unorganized* in quotes here precisely because he rightly questions the political logic of the black Left that saw proletarian spontaneity and therefore assumed a lack of organization, leadership, and intelligence. In the same sense I would argue that just because the Left often did not "see" leadership in the riots and street-fighting that took hold of dozens of cities and towns in 2020, *does not mean there were no leaders*.

The Left is making this crucial analytical (and strategic) mistake partly due to its own cowardice and timidity, but also because it understands leadership in the way we are taught to understand it by

states and economists, laid out at the beginning of this section. This state-derived notion of leadership carries with it its own internal logic that obscures other kinds of leadership available to us. Just like the modern state and capitalism, this understanding of leadership is not "neutral" on questions of who has power and wealth, on who makes decisions and how those decisions are made.

This form of leadership *sees the world as a state views the society it rules over*, and by no coincidence it leads to self-appointed "leaders" who view movements and social issues as their own private fiefdoms in which to exercise their own personal visions for change, often at the expense of more experimental or collaborative (and sometimes chaotic!) forms of organizing that oppressed communities may choose when left to their own devices. Sometimes these leaders will get angry if a group of people autonomously take action on some broad social issue without asking their permission—essentially, without paying homage to their "ownership" of that issue. Not by coincidence, maintaining rule of their private movement fiefdoms is also part of the career strategy of non-profit activists, who rely on a certain state-like vision of leadership to keep their grant money flowing, their 501c3 status legal, and their boards of directors happy. In this way, while Leninist organizations and non-profits may differ on political analysis, they tend to speak each other's language, and often share members and strategies, as is the case in my town.

Anyone who has participated in American social movements long enough, and dared to buck the Party line or propose with your actions an alternative strategy has witnessed firsthand these dynamics. If you are new to things, try pushing back and keeping your eyes open, and you'll see exactly what most of the Left means when it says "leadership." As you push back against this Leadership™, you will begin to notice how genuinely conservative—politically, but also temperamentally, culturally, and tactically—most Leadership™ in the American Left is.

Rethinking Leadership

Many feminist theorists have proposed a model of power that identifies both a domination obsessed "power-over" but also a collective, liberating "power-to." In the same sense, there is both a leadership that centralizes power and bottlenecks access to information and resources, and a leadership that decentralizes power and widens access to information and resources.

How might we start to think of this different kind of leadership, one that does not mimic the colonial logic of statecraft? How do these

and adjusted their approach accordingly. They have increasingly rejected or deprioritized organizing in ways that center the making of demands and communicating in dialogue with Power. As is typical, on-the-ground revolt has digested lessons of the recent past more quickly than the professional activists who would seek to guide it. The *spontaneity* of revolt as it emerges in real time in the 21st century *organizes* our movements in new ways that correspond with this new material reality. Unless we want to continue to force the square peg of the present into the round hole of a historical fetish for state mimicry, it is necessary to *reconsider the relationship between spontaneity and organization*.

"Spontaneity Organizes"

To those of us on the surface, the underground growth and development of a cicada is a thing unknown and unknowable. When billions of cicadas emerge into our aboveground world simultaneously, were it not for the reminders of biologists it would feel impromptu and miraculous.

To those in positions of power and comfort, an uprising may *feel* like it sprang up out of thin air, like a "natural" and "immediate" eruption. Undoubtedly the monied white men in Richmond experienced Gabriel Prosser's march on their city as a terrifying explosion of thoughtless, unbidden barbarity. But that feeling is not fact. To impose this derivative understanding of spontaneity upon revolt is to remain oblivious to the thousands of networks, friendships, meetings, conspiracies, songs, gangs, and whispers—to the beautiful social organization—that make an uprising possible. This is a false understanding of spontaneity that speaks with the mouth of our enemies.

In their article *Spontaneity, Mediation, Rupture*, the authors of the journal Endnotes write,

> Spontaneity is usually understood as an absence of organization. Something spontaneous arises from a momentary impulse, as if occurring naturally. Second International Marxists believed that workers' revolt was spontaneous, in this sense: it was a natural reaction to capitalist domination, which must be given shape by the party. This notion relies on what might be called a *derivative* meaning of the term spontaneity. In the 18th century, when Kant described the transcendental unity of apperception—the fact that I am aware of myself as having my own experiences—he called this a spontaneous act. Kant meant the

workers out in the cold, while it repeatedly privileged a segment of white male workers, who could then be relied upon to reaffirm that bargain with Capital for generations to come.[12] It was a long-term betrayal for limited short-term gains, but it was an approach that achieved reliable, reformist results for at least a privileged sector of the working class for some time. This stabilized economies in a certain stage of growth, and was an implied precondition for the Keynesian economic framework at the core of industrial economies in the mid-20th century.

This is no longer the world we live in. Stop Cop City was offered no such bargain. Capital and states have realized that they no longer need to secure that deal with (sectors of) the working class and dispossessed, meaning they no longer really need these centrist and center-left parties either. The services of these negotiators are no longer required; those parties served their purpose, and now they are being set aside. This is a dangerous strategic gamble on the part of states, to be sure, but it is clearly the move they have chosen. Capital is removing its mask, and the demands of popular revolts are now primarily met with silence, or an empty façade of negotiations made in transparently poor faith that serve only to allow the forces of hard repression time to better arrange their pieces on the chessboard.

These movements, and in particular those elements of spontaneous revolt, have learned a materialist lesson about the reality we live in and adjusted their approach accordingly.

This is our unsettling reality. Popular uprisings of the 21st century, marked by a spontaneous, on the ground wisdom that catches up to and then pushes history forward, have learned this lesson the hard way. They don't shy away from making demands upon Power due to a lack of the proper Leadership™, as suggested by some. In many cases, at least some sectors of social movements *do* still make demands upon power in a traditional sense. But, intelligently, they seem to do so with fewer and fewer expectations that these demands would or could ever be met. It is no longer their central strategy.

These movements, and in particular those elements of spontaneous revolt, have learned a materialist lesson about the reality we live in

[12] Looking at who was left out of Capital's agreement to allow for the legalization of unions with the Taft-Hartley Act—specifically industries dominated by black domestic workers, immigrants, public workers—demonstrates this easily. But so does the entire, racialized social safety net matrix established by the New Deal. White supremacy is a feature, not a bug, of social democracy.

alternative forms of leadership behave in social movements, and what are some examples?

Forms of leadership that *do not* mimic states tend to:

1) Spread resources and information broadly and horizontally, in a non-transactional manner. One might call this an "open-source" model. We can think through this dynamic with the example of monitoring police movement during a protest. Those stepping into and out of leadership roles at such a demonstration work to spread information from bike scouts about police movement as broadly as possible throughout the crowd. Rather than gatekeep that information from the crowd, and decide for everyone the correct route or tactics for the situation, they share that information in a calm and non-panicky manner. This gives the group as a whole the ability to make tactical (and personal) decisions about how to proceed, rather than having their movements prescribed to them by a small clique that controls crowd movements for its own unspoken internal interests.

This leadership is also contingent on forms of organization within the crowd that facilitate ground-level decision-making…. In this sense, movement *culture* matters deeply.

This leadership is also contingent on forms of organization within the crowd that facilitate ground-level decision-making…. In this sense, movement *culture* matters deeply. Every demonstration is an opportunity to grow and practice these forms of leadership and organization, and spread them to those who are new.

By contrast, a state-form of leadership does the opposite in this situation. In my town, it's not uncommon for non-profit affiliated activists to share information with crowds about police movement or communications, but *only* in ways that exaggerate or mischaracterize the omnipotence of the police, in order to scare off or suppress any possible direct action. In this way, such activists essentially act as arms of the state, "pre-policing" the crowd by manipulating or gatekeeping information and spreading panic.[6] The act of sharing information at a protest is itself a source of power, that can either

[6] A number of reportbacks from Palestine solidarity actions in 2024, from different cities, all reported on this phenomenon.

reinforce movement hierarchies and suppress popular initiative, or undermine those hierarchies by enabling spontaneity and self-organization. The politics, goals, and culture of those sharing the information matters deeply.

2) Understand leadership as temporary and untethered from bourgeois and bureaucratic notions of careerism and professionalism. As an example, we could imagine a leader as someone with a specific set of skills—perhaps construction skills, medical experience, combat training, or another kind of technical expertise—that offers to teach a series of classes at a local social center. In this sense, they are acting in a leadership role by proactively identifying a community need and taking initiative to help solve that problem. While teaching this series of classes they have a circumscribed kind of authority, limited by time and subject matter and interacted with voluntarily by others. Their "leadership" is a voluntary and temporary gift to the community around them. Borrowing from a concept explored by several anarchist anthropologists, this temporary authority is *non-transferrable*: in contrast with the state-like view of Leadership™, it does not easily exchange into a permanently marked position, status, or wealth, and is clearly bounded by context.[7] This leadership also acts to directly disperse knowledge horizontally to those who take the class, rather than gatekeeping that knowledge at the top of a permanent pyramid.

This temporary authority is *non-transferrable*: in contrast with the state-like view of Leaderhip™, it does not easily exchange into a permanently marked position, status, or wealth, and is clearly bounded by context.

3) Allow the movement to survive and persist despite when abuse is done by those in positions of influence. This kind of leadership does not mean that abuse and harm will never occur, but rather that those in positions of influence are less able to trade in that leadership for permanent status and thus stay in positions they can easily abuse. Because this kind of leadership is often rotating, temporary, and more likely to be specific to a certain situation, movements are partly inoculated against abusive and power-hungry

[7] Some would point out that problems of certain high-profile activists turning their skills into a kind of social capital still persist in this model of leadership, and that is absolutely true. But I believe we're better positioned to limit that problem when notions of leadership are non-careerist, temporary, and characterized by a kind of "role reduncancy," rather permanently institutionalized via bourgeois careerism.

renewed influence of indigenous struggles against extractive industries, among many others.

All of these conditions cause revolt and its accompanying forms of organization to look differently out of material necessity, rather than (at least at first) out of a purely ideological position. To summarize in too few words the ways these material shifts have caused revolt to "choose" new kinds of organization, we are no longer living in a time when speaking truth to or making demands upon Power appears pragmatic. Functionally speaking, the shifts in neoliberal capitalism of the past 50 years mean that in practical terms there is *no longer a center-left to make demands of*. This isn't simply because what remains of the center-left and centrist parties are too "corrupt" or ideologically co-opted to listen, as the progressives like to claim. That claim is true to a point, but mistakes a symptom for the cause, making all their efforts to "elect more progressive candidates" merely Sisyphus inching up the hill.

Fascist and ethno-nationalist parties are on the rise because they are useful to states and economies in ways that the center no longer is. And, importantly, what remains of the centrist parties, who alongside fascists increasingly preside over economies of financial speculation and circulation, *no longer has a reason to pretend to listen* to social movements. The labor coalitions that were these parties' lifeblood before capital moved overseas are gone forever, and now the center demonstrably no longer relates to social movements the same way.

The intensely brutal, naked repression that the Stop Cop City struggle in Atlanta has experienced, delivered by a coalition of local Democrats and state Republicans with absolutely *zero desire to negotiate*, demonstrates this with perfect clarity.

The intensely brutal, naked repression that the Stop Cop City struggle in Atlanta has experienced, delivered by a coalition of local Democrats and state Republicans with absolutely *zero desire to negotiate*, demonstrates this with perfect clarity. A century ago, a diverse, physically combative movement like Stop Cop City—which cost the city of Atlanta tens of millions of dollars, used direct action to physically delay the project for over two years, and radically shifted public opinion—could opt to make radical demands of the center-left and predictably receive reformist results in return. In the early 20th century, this strategy was repeatedly a Faustian bargain, to be sure. It usually left black workers, migrant workers, domestic, and female

a variety of anti-colonial struggles, to new historical understandings of marronage by former Panthers, to so many others. There is no shortage of examples and theories; what matters is that this "theory" must emerge organically from the most everyday sites of struggle and survival, not from a singular notion of "correct" structure fixed in idealized concrete.[11]

The New World We Inhabit

Despite a resurgence among small corners of the internet for the distant, fetishized iconography of the Old Left, mostly among those who are too young to have seen the behavior of that Left in real time, the most militant and broadly participatory struggles of the last three decades in North America have largely rejected the assumptions implied in its style of Organization™. First and foremost this has been done *in practice*, in response to the material realities of late Capitalism structuring our lives very differently than they did in the late 19th and early 20th century.

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Dozens of factors are at play here: the shift from economies built around manufacturing to those built on circulation and financial speculation; the corresponding decline of the labor movement and social democratic parties; the collapse of the USSR and the hollowing out of its geopolitical coalition; the increase of more precarious and feminized forms of labor; the politics of migration and changing technologies around border enforcement; the massive rise of the prison-industrial complex and increased militarization of racialized policing; the existential threat presented by industrial economies via climate change; and the

[11] "For this reason, there can be no fixed theory of struggle. There can only be a phenomenology of the experience of revolt." "*Spontaneity, Mediation, Rupture,*" Endnotes Vol. 3.

leaders by being less dependent upon them. A movement being less dependent on these leaders can also make holding them to account easier.

Again, this does not mean that some people will not cause harm or even betray their comrades and loved ones, but it does mean that an entire movement or organization is less likely to fall apart when that leader lets down their people. This also allows our movements to avoid the disturbing cults of personality that often characterize State Socialism. In the words of Russell Maroon Shoatz, we are a many-headed hydra, not a dragon.

4) Appear illegible to the ruling class, and therefore difficult to co-opt or repress. Because it operates on a truly alien logic, politicians, police, capitalists, thinktanks, journalists, academics, and the like have a harder time identifying this kind of leadership, and a difficult time understanding its relationship with the broader movement. This is sometimes referred to as *opacity*, and it is a tremendous strategic strength. The redundancy built into this model also means that when police do press charges upon these leaders, those charges often fail to undermine the movement as a whole.

A brief example: From 2007-2008, a massive series of demonstrations and blockades were organized to confront the Republican National Convention in St. Paul, MN. The organizing occurred nationally for over a year and a half, with multiple spokes-councils inviting delegates from dozens of organizations and affinity groups from around the country to develop a plan for coordinated blockades at intersections in downtown St. Paul, that would effectively shut the city down and prevent the convention from taking place. Local anarchists took the lead in organizing and facilitating these spokescouncils.

These meetings were unfortunately infiltrated by informants on more than one occasion, and at least one informant was present in local organizing. A day before the convention, the FBI and local police raided multiple public organizers' houses around the Twin Cities, ultimately arresting eight people who they believed to be indispensable "ringleaders" and charging them with intense felony conspiracy charges.

In spite of the local organizing body being seriously disrupted by the raids and charges, and in spite of police being vaguely aware of the overall strategy, *the blockades outmaneuvered riot police and happened anyway*. Though the RNC still took place, the city was largely shut down, and a new wave of insurrectionary anarchist organizing and action came out of that weekend of blockades,

sabotage, and organizing. And, eventually, the RNC 8 beat their charges and went free.

Because initiative and decision-making was located at the base level of affinity groups and participating orgs, the repression of local leadership did not disable the action. Despite not facing anywhere near the same level of repression, state socialist and liberal groups organizing around the RNC achieved nothing close to this level of planning or disruption. A dragon would have been beheaded and the entire weekend would have been a complete failure, with crowds waiting on orders that never came. Instead, the hydra was able to persist minus one head, and outmaneuver a police force that had two years of prep and a special 40 million dollar budget all dedicated to stopping it. This was thanks to the leadership of the local organizers prioritizing *a structure that facilitated self-organization* and ultimately planning *for their own redundancy*.

5) Expand rather than contract or curtail revolutionary activity. Broadly speaking, this ***leadership-by-expansion*** can happen in three ways: by social group, by subject, or by geography. We can imagine a small conflict with the local ruling class in the town we live in: say, a group of tenants going on rent strike in one particular building. That conflict could be expanded by low-income homeowners *(a new social group)* organizing a mass-deferral on their mortgage in solidarity with the tenants; or by an affinity group cell destroying all the patrol cars in a precinct lot and declaring in a public statement that the struggle against the police *(a new subject)* is also a struggle against landlords, and that the police will face further attacks if they suppress the strike; or by tenants in a different part of town organizing a neighborhood assembly to spread the strike to their block *(a new geography)*.

This *leadership-by-expansion* occurs by proposal, initiative, creativity, coordination, and solidarity. It acts as a gift. It uses coordination but requires neither consensus nor a singular command structure.

All of these actions offer a kind of leadership that expands the struggle from its initial point of rupture—a tenant strike in one building—to a broader terrain in which more and more groups of people can add their own energy, input, and character, all while confusing our enemies and destabilizing their strategies of repression. This ***leadership-by-expansion*** occurs by proposal, initiative, creativity, coordination, and solidarity. It acts as a gift. It uses coordination but

feels familiar and comfortable to those who live under states and capitalism. Like their particular, colonized notion of leadership, their understanding of Organization™ assumes a range of things that start to look and sound exactly how a state forces newly colonized peoples to "organize" themselves.[10] These include:

1) A *hierarchical* chain of command

2) A *set of decision-makers* identifiable not just to themselves but who are also legible to enemy structures of Power

3) A *centralized* body with a singular and unified mechanism of enforcement

4) A *permanence* that suggests the Organization is more important than the tasks it was initially formed to accomplish

5) A *bureaucratic* manner of administration

6) A body of officers driven by bourgeois notions of *professionalism*

Put more succinctly and eloquently by Kimathi Muhammad,

> During crisis situations, professionals have nothing to say except that we must approach our problems systematically. The type of organization most professionals see as necessary is a small group of highly educated people meeting behind closed doors in a mahogany-furnished room, deciding the fate of the movement on paper. But what the professionals attempt to organize on paper, poor people are busy organizing daily on their jobs, in their homes and communities.

It would be easy to contrast this notion of Organization™ with an alternative "theory" of organization. There are infinite examples of how everyday people coordinate and plan with each other to accomplish the tasks of care, survival, and revolt in ways that fundamentally contradict the logic of statecraft, from which such a theory could be built. The earlier conversation about leadership points in this direction quite clearly, as do decades and decades of reflections on the theory and practice of movements that reject the state, from the many examples of South American horizontalisms, to

[10] "The notion of the party is a notion imported from the mother country…We have seen that inside the nationalist parties, the will to break colonialism is linked with another quite different will: that of coming to a friendly agreement with it." (Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*)

On Spontaneity and Organization

"Keep the focus on the action not the institution; don't confuse the vehicle with the objective; all cocoons are temporary and disappear."
Toni Cade Bambara, *The Salt Eaters*

"Picture this: Earth has made its first contact with an extraterrestrial species, and, as to be expected, their anatomy and nervous system are entirely different from our own. Rather than having a single brain where all sensory information and motor controls are processed, they have nine brains. Rather than having a rigid skeleton, they have compact arrays of muscle tissue that stiffen and soften when they move, and their many limbs have an infinite number of degrees of freedom. Oh, and they can only breath underwater, too." – "Nine Brains are Better Than One: An Octopus' Nervous System", Maggie Stephen

What is organization? On the surface the word should simply and broadly refer to a group of people working together with a shared purpose, but much like "leadership," the term has been beaten to death by the Left in such a way as to suggest something politically much more narrow.

How often do we hear the refrain from some earnest and probably well-meaning activist, while gesturing at a revolt of some kind with detached apprehension, "What we need is to get organized!" On its surface such vagueness is difficult to dispute: sure, let's *be* organized. But the weight of the statement is in the implication that goes unspoken, that organization is *not yet present*. This suggests that it is something that must be imposed from outside upon the masses, that organization cannot emerge nascently from revolt without outside intervention, nor can organization preempt that revolt in a form that appears alien to those who claim to desire it.

The fact that this statement can be uttered at all, with so few objecting to its many unspoken assumptions, suggests that it is operating on a logic inherited without question from the society it supposedly seeks to alter. As in the earlier discussion of leadership, most of what qualifies as the Left in North America wields this word in a way that

requires neither consensus nor a singular command structure. The homeowners joining the strike, for example, may or may not "agree" with the attack on the patrol cars, but their agreement is not necessary for the actions of both to interact synergistically and push forward the struggle.

Likewise, the original group of striking tenants are supported with mutual aid and acts of solidarity, but they are also not centered in a solitary way that presumes they are the only ones in town who should decide how the broader struggle against landlords moves forward. Nor are whatever institutions that say they are in solidarity with or "represent" those tenants—perhaps a union or non-profit—centered in such a way as to give them control over how the entire movement should expand.

It is easy to contrast this with how we know Leadership™ in much of the American Left would behave in this situation. Their party or non-profit bureaucracies would be unlikely to show the initiative required to spread the strike to a different part of town or amongst low-income homeowners, and would consider such expansion by others a threat upon their own control over the movement. They would most certainly condemn or at least distance themselves from the attack on the patrol cars, considering the mere stain-by-association of such an illegal attack a threat upon their own position, funding sources, and comfort. They *definitely* would not carry out that attack themselves. At local demonstrations organized in solidarity with the tenant strike, they would show up with uniformed peace police, hired by a local non-profit to prevent others from acting in any kind of escalation or expansion unapproved by Leadership™.

The role of their kind of Leadership™ is not expansion, but *contraction* and *suffocation*. It is to suppress any acts of solidarity that do not occur within the bounds of legal and non-profit bureaucracy, which is to say, most actual acts of everyday working-class solidarity. At its core, this kind of Leadership™ cosplays as a mini-state, treating the larger movement like a society it wishes to rule, and so, whether intentionally or not, its function is to do what all states exist to do: *prevent insurgency*.

The Failure of Anarchism to Clarify the Conversation Around Leadership

Many of these points are common in anarchist circles, but anarchists have often done themselves no favors in discussions around leadership. Occupying a kind of performative posture of reactionary

(albeit understandable) defiance to the counter-insurgent farce that passes for much "leadership" among the Left, many anarchists have introduced confusion rather than clarity here. They scream out "A strong community needs no leaders!" among a thousand other silly gestures.

These gestures do not and cannot actually accomplish the elimination of leadership—non-state-like forms of leadership like those mentioned above will inevitably still occur, because they form part of the basis of everyday social life and are fundamental to the creative forms of self-organization of the dispossessed everywhere. Rather, (some) anarchists simply try to define these kinds of leadership out of existence. The ensuing confusion is inevitable.

Ironically, the kinds of horizontal leadership being discussed in this piece are often carried out by anarchist militants themselves. When Abel Paz and his other fifteen-year old friends raided an armory in Barcelona so people would have the means to initially repel Franco's fascist invasion, they were most certainly taking on a temporary role of leadership, one which was made possible by months of scouting and planning. The brave umbrella-wielding affinity groups who led the (partial) escape from the kettle on January 20th at Trump's first inauguration protests may think they're "against leaders," but they most certainly were acting in a leadership role.

One could argue this is merely a semantic distinction, but its actually a real problem. The position of "no leadership" ends up preemptively cutting off any substantive discussion on what it means to develop practices of autonomous initiative, mentorship, and experimentation—all of which are intrinsically necessary to revolutionary struggle and all of which involve individuals or groups *leading* by example. If we cannot elaborate upon what these alternative forms of leadership look and feel like, on what their role in our movements should and *should not* be, then we're stuck in a reactive place.

How often have we seen people shirk away from roles of temporary leadership, whether it's choosing not to stand on a car-hood to propose a new tactic to the crowd, or not choosing a new set of targets to attack in the struggle rather than just "follow the riot," or not teaching a skill to our community in fear of being seen as some kind of "authority?"[8] This problem is distinct from the anarchist emphasis

[8] My own discussions with my long-term comrades on our successes and failures during the 2020 uprising locally have repeatedly returned to this notion of our own failure to *lead-by-expansion*, and instead opt for the "easier" path of simply "following the riot." In those mass street conflicts we played useful roles, but it was nevertheless a reactive posture. We've often reflected that the most powerful and useful we felt in that summer and fall, in addition to helping crowds resist the

Part of history forgets, that as the cops are inside the bar, the confrontation started outside by throwing change at the police. We started with the pennies, the nickels, the quarters, and the dimes. "Here's your payoff, you pigs! You fucking pigs! Get out of our faces. " This was started by the street queens of that era, which I was part of, Marsha P. Johnson, and many others that are not here…

One thing led to another. The confrontation got so hot, that Inspector [Seymour] Pine, who headed this raid, him and his men had to barricade themselves in our bar, because they could not get out…. The cops were actually so afraid of us that night that if we had busted through that bar's door, they were gonna shoot. They were ordered to shoot if that door busted open. Someone yanked a parking meter out the floor, which was loose, because it's very hard to get a parking meter out of the ground (laughter). It was loose, you know, I don't know how it got loose. But that was being rammed into the door.

People have also asked me, "Was it a pre-planned riot?," because out of nowhere, Molotov cocktails showed up. I have been given the credit for throwing the first Molotov cocktail by many historians but I always like to correct it; I threw the second one, I did not throw the first one! [laughter] And I didn't even know what a Molotov cocktail was; I'm holding this thing that's lit and I'm like "What the hell am I supposed to do with this?" "Throw it before it blows!" "OK!" [9]

[9] Excerpt from Sylvia Rivera's 2001 talk at the Lesbian And Gay Community Services Center, New York City

possible or desirable in forms that mimic the colonial logic of statecraft. This allows Leadership™ to argue the falsehood that they're the only ones seriously interested in the very real questions of how to generate revolutionary activity and assert power.

We need out of this trap. We need to stop looking at our movements like a state views the society it seeks to dominate. We need to stop fetishizing the leadership-form of the colonial structures that evolved to manage administrative bureaucracies—political parties, non-profits, industrial technocrats, universities, militaries--and start seeing and *trusting* the creative, problem-solving genius and liberatory desires of normal ass people. This means naming these autonomous and liberatory forms of leadership explicitly as such, and refusing to cede that discourse to the self-styled Leadership™ that would render our struggles tame and toothless.

on anonymity, which has a valuable logic rooted in some very hard lessons learned about security culture and repression. The lack of clarity around leadership has resulted in a movement that often lacks the confidence to share useful lessons around tactics, strategy, and vision. There are ways to navigate and balance these needs, but treating the concept of leadership itself like a taboo subject prevents us from finding them.

Another problem of this (supposedly) anarchist position on leadership is the very real confusion it introduces into conversations with new militants trying out these concepts of autonomous initiative for the first time. With no real sustained discussion of which kinds of leadership contribute to liberation versus which kinds function as counter-insurgency, new folks are often left on their own to suss out the incoherent cultural norms of a political scene that simultaneously eschews certain *optics* of leadership while also demonstrating *in practice* a wide variety of leadership-by-example. The confusion is made even worse by the ways that many anarchists, in not wanting to appear like an expert or "authority", instinctually avoid roles of mentorship to new radicals. For self-evident reasons this is a particular problem in political communities that struggle with inter-generationality, whiteness, and social segregation.

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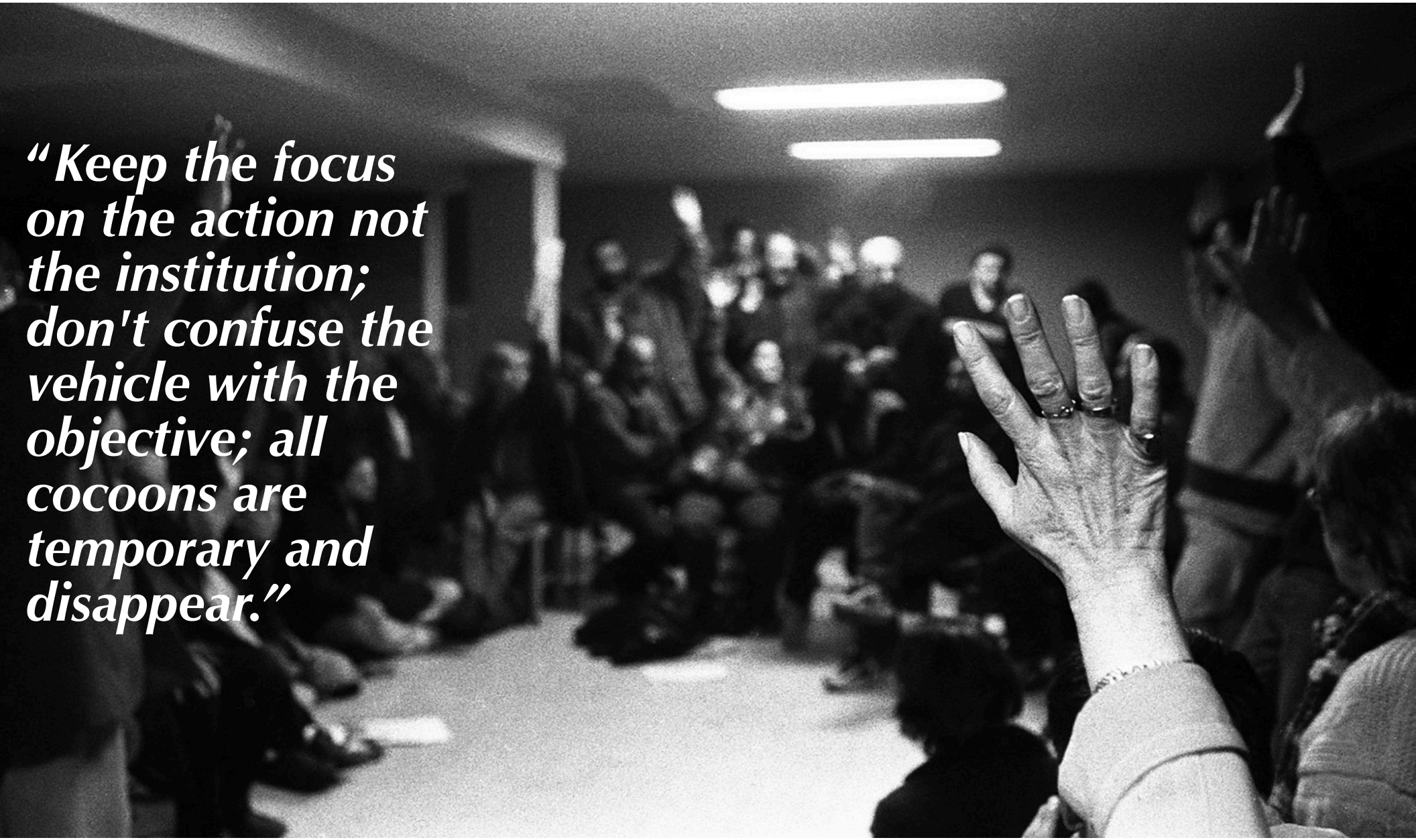
Sometimes, if we can't name something, we can't see it. The position of "No Leaders!" held by some anarchists can prevent them from seeing the very real forms of liberating, non-state-like leadership already happening every day in oppressed communities. Ironically, while it occupies a posture of defiance, their position actually *accepts the terms of the debate* set by the statist Left—that leadership is only

police, was when we were attempting to aid the movement through the occupations of physical space like buildings or parks.

To me this offers a far more useful and grounded critique than the kinds of neo-Lenninism that argue that such uprisings are hopelessly limited by their lack of vertical organization and their refusal to prioritize making demands on politicians. These uprisings hit a limit not due to their refusal to mimic the State, but due to their failure to expand and coordinate *horizontally* beyond their initial explosion. Where expansion and coordination did occur, the uprisings went farther and harder, and lasted longer.


“Keep the focus on the action not the institution; don't confuse the vehicle with the objective; all cocoons are temporary and disappear.”